



Make Your Story Stand Out in a Writing Contest

By Connie Goldsmith

Last year, I had the privilege of judging the young adult book entries in the 2015 Utah Original Writing Competition. I selected first- and second-place winners, and two honorable mentions from nearly forty entries. Agents, editors, and even contest judges look for similar elements in a story. These include:

- Fresh, original story. Some pundits say there are only a few stories to be told, that the secret to being published is *how* you tell *your* story. All writers are individuals with unique ideas and experience to bring to their work. Find a fresh way to tell your story to make it shine in a writing contest.
- Strong voice. A strong voice captivates a reader on the first page, in the first paragraph, and even in the first sentence. Readers want to like the main character immediately, or they may be tempted to put the book down.
- Believable dialogue. Writing dialogue is one of the hardest challenges. We all speak in a sort of shorthand, running our words together, leaving out words, using slang, repetition, and placeholders such as “ah” and “um.” While written dialogue cannot be exactly like daily chatter, you can use techniques such as interruptions and sentence fragments (sparingly, please) to achieve a dialogue that is neither too formal nor too slangy. Be sure the dialogue is appropriate for your intended audience. If you’re not, ask friends what their teens are saying these days.
- Character growth and development. Main characters have problems to solve. The story shows us how they solve their problems. We need to know early what the character wants or needs. And by the end of the story, the character must have achieved significant growth and change as she solves the problem. He must have gained an understanding of life and himself that he didn’t have at the story’s start.
- Suitability for YA interests. Manuscripts in this particular contest had main characters ranging from ten years old to adults. Be sure your manuscript fits the contest criteria. Sixteen-year-olds don’t want to read about twelve-year-olds, nor do they want to read stories about adults disguised as YA stories. Teen readers want to read about characters their own age or slightly older. Generally, middle grade novels are for ages ten to twelve, while young adult novels are for twelve and up, sometimes fourteen and up, depending on content. Read lots and lots of novels in your genre to know what’s selling these days. Then read a few more for good measure.

A number of the entries had intriguing premises, but the writing wasn’t strong enough to carry the story. The manuscripts often shared similar errors, most of which are easily remedied. If you’ve been working on a story for years, check it over for outdated terms. For example, several of the contest stories were set in contemporary times, yet used outdated brand names,

such as Swanson frozen dinners, or terms such as boom box. You know how kids today listen to music, and it's not on a boom box.

Follow the contest rules about how to format your manuscript. Typically, you start halfway down the first page; double-space the lines; use common fonts such as Arial or Times New Roman; indent paragraphs—don't triple-space them. Today, spacing between sentences is one space, not two. Know that failure to follow contest instructions may disqualify a manuscript.

Work to make your craft better. Use less telling and more showing through action and dialogue. Some manuscripts had pages of description with little action or dialogue. That's a good way to bore your reader. Avoid overuse of tags in YA writing. They're more appropriately used in middle grade novels where young readers may be confused. But a sophisticated teen reader doesn't need to have every sentence tagged "he said" or "she replied."

Watch out for errors. Microsoft Word does a nice job of telling you when you've spelled a word incorrectly by underlining it in red, or marking it to show discordance between verb and noun. Don't ignore those markings. Fix them! Some manuscripts had dozens and dozens of errors in spelling.

Manuscripts also had dozens of errors in word usage that spell-check won't catch. Know when to use already and all ready. Realize that all right is highly preferable to alright (some sources don't consider alright a word). Know the difference between it's and its; there, their, and they're; your and you're. Know the difference between plural and possessive. Don't throw in an apostrophe just in case. Know what a proper noun is and what it isn't. Only proper nouns should be capitalized. Many people seem to capitalize words at random. This is elementary-school stuff, folks. Do it right and impress that agent, editor, or judge!

Lastly, if you are an aspiring children's writer of any genre, the single best thing you can do is join SCBWI, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, a highly-respected international organization just for us! Visit www.scbwi.org to see the many benefits members receive. The next best thing you can do is to join a critique group or start one of your own. My critique group is my lifeline and SCBWI is my guide. They can work for you, too.

Connie Goldsmith writes nonfiction, primarily for Lerner's school and library imprint for young adult readers, Twenty-First Century Books. Her 17 nonfiction books (two due out in 2016) are about health, science, and history. Her most recent book, "Bombs Over Bikini," was a Junior Library Guild selection, a Bank Street College Best Book, and won the 2015 SCBWI Crystal Kite Award for California and Hawaii. Connie has judged all genres of writing in numerous contests, and has performed paid and unpaid critiques for SCBWI-related events. She reads YA fiction voraciously, reviews YA novels for The New York Journal of Books, and has read and reviewed more than seven hundred children's books of all genres for California Kids, a Sacramento regional parenting publication. Visit her websites at www.conniegoldsmith.com and www.bombsoverbikini.com.